

Sermon at Brecon Cathedral

The Baptism of Christ at 11.00am

Mark 1.4-11

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Dean of Brecon

In the New Year episode of Casualty the team records their resolutions for the New Year. The team nurse, Charlie told the camera, 'I'm going to call my son more often and tell him I love him'. A few years ago, I was chatting with someone who was only 31 years old, and has taken big strides against the odds in his life to move away from a life of drugs, anger issues and stays in prison. I said, 'I'm very proud of what you've done and how far you have come in your life'. His eyes filled up and I thought I said the wrong thing and upset him. But, wiping away his tears he said, 'I have longed all my life for my father to say that to me, and he never has, and never will. Thank you.' I too know from my experience how fathers can become tongue-tied or too embarrassed to say such things. Not to be held, or have that look that assures you that you are loved, even if the words aren't spoken, are crucial to being a human being. We may need to be the one who says these words first. It happens all the time in families, in businesses and organisations, politics and even churches, when there is an ungenerous spirit, where people seek generous affirmation and are valued and loved. It probably seems impossible to the vulnerable and poor, those who have never had affirmation from their earthly parent. It is a common story I heard over and over again in my work with homelessness and drug addiction, where men and women live with brokenness of relationships in their families.

On 04 February 1968 Martin Luther King delivered a sermon that was played at his funeral later that year. He said there is, deep down within us all an instinct and desire to be at the front of attention, a desire to be in front. But, that isn't what Jesus did; He did something altogether different. He went on to say 'keep feeling the need for being first. But I want you to be first in love. I want you to be first in moral excellence. I was you to be first in generosity. That is what I want you to do.'

One of the challenges of this Epiphany season and the baptism of Christ, is to be surprised again and again by Jesus. The temptation is to linger where it is comfortable and warm, to remain at the stable of Bethlehem. But no, the Scriptures and the Spirit are pushing us back into the busy, fragile world, beyond the Church. Christ's example of His own baptism gives witness to this pattern. The Spirit is also driving Christians out into

the world to be surprised by Jesus, to look beyond ourselves and to look beyond our own preoccupations and concerns. But, God does not send us out without first looking on us and affirming us, as he did with His own Son, 'This is my wonderful Son; I am well pleased with Him'. The whole point of the Baptism is Christ, and therefore our baptism, is this very point that we are God's sons and daughters, and God is pleased with us, even when we mess things up or become complacent. Keep feeling the need for being first. The first in love. The first in moral excellence. The first in generosity. That is what God wants of us all.

We are reminded today as we celebrate the Baptism of Christ that we belong to God and he delights in us. When you are saying your prayers, use your name followed with the words, 'and I am God's dearly loved child, and he delights in my life'. Learn to hear those words more and more that we may be changed into his likeness and empowered to be the first in love, the first in moral excellence and the first in generosity.

With his affirmation of His Father's love at his Baptism, Jesus was then thrust into the wilderness, following the same path as his ancestors the Israelites. He was not shielded by the temptations and darkness of the desert, far from it, but God's angels ministered to him. He went into the wilderness to struggle with dark forces, knowing that he was loved and God delighted in him.

Six centuries before Jesus Baptism, the warnings of the prophets Micah, Jeremiah and Isaiah all foretold Jerusalem would be destroyed, the armies of Judah would be defeated and the population cast to the seven winds. The royal family, the government and the professional classes sent into exile in Babylon, as the psalms remind us, and it was there that they sat down and wept, overwhelmed by darkness, despair and questioning. Where is their God now? Have they been utterly and irretrievably abandoned? But out of this darkness and despair there gradually comes a new understanding of themselves as a nation and a people and a new understanding of God himself. It is that new understanding of God that we see manifest in Christ's Baptism this morning as we hold the horrific images of what has happened to our neighbours in France over the last few days. We must pray that they will one day move from the rivers of Babylon where the Israelites wept, to another river where they will witness the affirmation of Baptism. That they will not only be resilient and united, but that they show the world what it means to be the first in love. The first in moral excellence. The first in generosity. That is what God wants of us all.

John the Baptizer has been active alongside the Jordan, with a message that wasn't comfortable. He spoke of a fire that would blaze, an axe that would cut down the tree and called for repentance that would lead to a complete and lasting change of heart and life. It is this call to repentance that the Church proclaims to all terrorists and organisations that bring darkness and destruction on cities and towns.

Water has the power to bring life and to disturb. Our baptism should bring us life and disturb us into action to proclaim the Gospel in word and service. The paradox of disturbance and life is an ever present reality in our lives and the lives of nations across the globe. So, we will be persistent in our commitment to be the first. The first in love. The first in moral excellence. The first in generosity. That is what God wants of all his wonderful children, in whom he is delighted.

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